Self-Publishing and Collection Development

Holley, Robert P.

Published by Purdue University Press

Holley, Robert P.
Purdue University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/42556.

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I’ve been fortunate to sit on both sides of the publishing spectrum. Traditionally, I’ve gained a loyal and happy following of readers who enjoy my historical and contemporary romances. These satisfied readers have supported me throughout my career—even when that career took me into the world of independent publishing. When all is said and done, readers only care about one name on the book—the author’s. Sadly, this train of thought does not seem to hold true in the library realm, which has only seemed to value works created only in the traditional publishing world.

I’m often asked why I decided to venture into the world of self-publishing when I was blessed enough to acquire a book deal from an internationally known publishing house. Quite simply, it was my readers who made this leap not only a successful one, but a necessary one. The rejection of my fourth title in my then three-book series chronicling the Ramsey family out of Seattle, Washington, set me on my journey of becoming an independent publisher. The publishing house still loved my voice and remained interested in publishing my work. My traditional publishers were not, however, interested in more stories in this series (which has been spun off to include another family and, as of November 2014, stands at 18 popular titles thanks to my insatiable readers).

In 2009, my career forked off toward the independent publishing world. My only concern then was continuing the unfinished series for my readers. I didn’t stop to think (or even care to think) about how this independently published work would be received in the library world. I should probably have given it a little more thought as, once the work was
completed, it would need to be made available, right? Even now, years later, I can’t say that, if I had it all to do again, I would have put greater effort into finding a new traditional publisher for the work. I had the opportunity back then to do just that. A few well-known houses were interested in the work, but something about sheltering the Ramsey family under the roof of a new house just didn’t sit right with me. I knew that the plot I was building for this crew would not play nicely with certain publishing guidelines that I was already familiar with. It went without saying that publishing with a new house would only bring along more guidelines. I wanted the freedom to create this story as I saw fit, and my readers were all on board with that.

At this time, I had been making my living in the library field for about eight years. I had spent about two and a half years working as a reference associate for a public library before moving on to the academic environment where I spent another eight years working as a library serials assistant for a private college in North Carolina. I was getting a very good education in how libraries worked. Not until I went to work in the technical services department as a serials assistant did I come to understand more about the collection development process. Of course, I’ve never expected to see work such as mine gracing the shelves of an academic library, or at least not back then. Now, however, academic libraries are appearing to grasp the importance of enhancing their fiction sections with material more likely to interest leisure readers. This strategy is designed to increase library use and is proving highly successful. Still, academic libraries are not flooding their shelves with romance novels or with independently published titles no matter what the subject matter.

Again, this is not surprising. We are talking about academic libraries, after all. Still, working in the academic environment is where I’ve had the greatest opportunity to see the selection process at work. My day job now consists of helping to build my library’s collection where I’ve worked as a reference librarian for the past two years. Librarians rely on varying resources to assist in that selection process. They attend conferences where they have the chance to visit with book vendors and discuss what direction current reading trends are taking. They subscribe to most respected publications that not only discuss these trends but also review the latest in reading material. Such reviews are often the deciding factor in what librarians will choose to add to their collections. Herein lays a huge roadblock to the indie author seeking library shelf space.
BOOK REVIEWS

Publications such as Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, Booklist, and Kirkus Reviews are staples for librarians when building collections. Librarians lean heavily on the views presented in these publications when making selection choices. As a traditional author, I’ve had my titles regularly reviewed in Romantic Times BOOKClub Magazine, another well-respected publication that librarians use when building their fiction collections. Romantic Times has recently started reviewing independently published titles. Keep in mind that these publications often require a copy of the work at least four months in advance of the publication date. Things can move pretty quickly in the indie world, and setting a release date to accommodate a review can be a stumbling block for the author who plans to make his or her work available as soon as it’s completed. As a whole, many indie authors will find that the aforementioned publications and many like them won’t even touch a self-published work for review. Within the first few lines of many review submission guidelines, you are likely to see the statement “We Do Not Read Self-Published Work” or something to that effect. This is not to say that indie authors can’t break the mold and get their work reviewed, but it’s far from easy unless the indie work is gaining a tremendous buzz. Also, indie authors can work on perhaps getting a feature story done that will gain them notice as well.

So why is it so difficult for an independently published author to get work reviewed in such publications? While I’m in no position to give a definitive response, as a librarian weighing this issue, I could say that an indie publication is perhaps not properly vetted the way that traditional material would be. A self-published title may or may not be edited by anyone other than the author. Traditional titles go through several hands before the book even goes into production. An author submits a proposal to the editor who decides whether the idea has merit—usually, in fact, the editor meets with a team of other editors and assistants who weigh in on that decision. If the idea is approved, once the manuscript is written, the author submits it for extensive copyediting on grammar, story structure, and other factors. This should not mean that a traditionally published story is better than an independent one, but it is often the standard by which such stories are measured. This is unfortunate, given that grammatical errors, dry plots, back cover copy discrepancies, and other negatives often exist in abundance
amidst the pages of traditionally published works. Since traditional publications have the benefit of being reviewed by more than one set of eyes, there is, however, greater opportunity to catch and correct these faults.

In the years that I’ve been in the independent publishing game, things have improved. Indie work is garnering a lot more respect than it had in the past. Publishing houses have reached out to well-received self-published authors to re-release those publications on a grander scale. This is a blessing, for any self-published author is all too familiar with the next dreaded obstacle: distribution.

**DISTRIBUTION**

Whether traditionally or independently published, a book has little hope of being read if a reader can’t find it. In spite of the popularity of e-books, having printed books appear on the shelves of libraries across the country is still a dream for many authors. Additionally, there are still readers who prefer holding an actual printed title in their hands. As an independently published author, I’ve had the chance to see this shift play out over the years. When I published my first indie title in 2009, I worked with a company who pretty much did all the work for me—all I had to do was pay them. It wasn’t until I started publishing my books via Amazon’s CreateSpace and Kindle platforms that I really got my greatest education in this world of on-demand publishing.

My e-book title *Truth in Sensuality* (March 2009) was published exclusively via the Kindle and CreateSpace platforms. I was one of the first traditionally published African American romance authors to utilize these platforms. Publishing *Truth in Sensuality* was about my breaking free of the traditional publishing molds. I never expected this erotic romance title to wind up on a library’s shelves. I wrote it because the subject matter for me was about as far removed from anything I’d done up until that time. This title and the next several books that I published in print and electronically with Amazon’s CreateSpace and Kindle platforms also allowed me to witness a shift in other publishing molds as well. I noticed that my print titles did quite well. I’m not an e-book person, but I made the titles available in that format to accommodate all my readers. Gradually, I began to take notice of the sizable shift in sales from print to digital. Many indie authors choose to publish exclusively in e-book format; I can’t quite get
myself to that way of thinking and continue to release titles electronically and in print. I suppose it’s the librarian in me. The topic of print distribution is still relevant to me.

Distribution is vital, especially for the self-published author. Distribution, however, can be even harder to obtain than a book review. For the author looking to have books grace a library’s shelves, it is a necessity. Unfortunately, the term “on demand” is what generally seems to freeze distributors in their tracks. Once the library makes its decision on what material it wants to purchase, it usually connects with its distributor to place the order. Although libraries sometimes buy directly, it’s most common to use the services of the distributor. Distributors purchase books in bulk and make their money when the client makes its purchases. What happens if the client doesn’t make those purchases? Do the books just sit looking pretty in a warehouse? No. The distributor must have a way of returning the product if it cannot be sold. There is a return policy agreement between distributors and publishers. In the on-demand world, once a title is purchased, it’s then printed and shipped with no returns.

It’s a frustrating situation for any indie author, but it’s doubly frustrating for a traditionally published independent author. I watched my traditional titles being preordered by libraries across the country. My independent titles barely got a nod. I recall e-mailing a collection development librarian at a nearby library 20 minutes away from my home. She told me that they would be unable to carry my books in their library and wished me good luck placing my work elsewhere. At that point, the blinders finally began to fall away; I realized it was a distribution thing. It had to be, given the fact that the library was definitely carrying all my traditional titles. In defense of the library, however, it generally comes down to a financial decision. There are far more authors in the world than there are libraries, and libraries are bound by the frustrating word “budgets.”

**BUDGET**

As a librarian and an author, I can identify with the frustrations that exist on both sides. In my own collection development capacities for my library, there is material I would love to acquire for our shelves that we simply cannot afford. Budgetary issues have always held relevance for libraries; but, with the lingering effects of the economic crises, libraries are still reeling
from shorter hours, smaller staffs, and decreased funding. What money a library has must be spent wisely, and that means librarians must lean more heavily on their traditional decision making to help them make choices that are both economical and beneficial to their patrons.

For an academic library, this is especially challenging. While we are eager to build our fiction sections to attract more leisure readers and thereby increase our library traffic statistics, the bulk of our funds must be dedicated to building our academic collection. While traditional public libraries aren’t so focused on acquiring materials to satisfy various academic disciplines, they too have collection areas that they must work to maintain and keep relevant. Reference materials consist of everything from books to training materials, newspapers, and periodicals. The children’s area must hold material that is both entertaining and educational for young readers. Libraries also strive to meet the needs of those who visit their facilities for more than print materials. Film and music offerings as well as materials necessary for history and genealogical research require a large amount of a library’s financial resources. I could devote another few pages to discussing the costs of Internet/wireless access and electronic database subscriptions.

So libraries must make their money stretch quite a distance. They purchase a lot more than books. Being selective in the reading materials they add to the collection is as much about adding quality for their readers as it is about being economical in order to provide the necessities that all their users require.

As stated earlier, I can identify with the frustrations that exist on the side of the author as well as the side of the librarian. There are, of course, those librarians that don’t need to lean on the reviews of the most renowned publications or be tied down by budgetary restrictions when it comes to avoiding ordering independent materials. These librarians wouldn’t place an order for an indie title to save their lives. Some feel that nothing comes out of that pool but rubbish and that authors who independently publish only do so because they couldn’t get a traditional contract. When met with the argument that these authors don’t earn a lot of money in self-publishing, these librarians say that it must be the authors’ massive egos that are the motivating factor.

As an indie author, I can honestly say that some of these viewpoints do have some validity. I’ve come across some releases that are really disturbing—the titles and story overviews alone are enough to give me a shudder.
I know it’s these kinds of works that add fuel to those unfortunate arguments and make it more difficult for the really worthy independently published material to get a true shot at being purchased. As a result, it’s not an easy thing (or timely and cost-efficient) for a librarian to successfully wade through subpar material to get to those works that show real promise.

The intention of this chapter is not to dissuade all indie authors, to suggest that they just give up and stop trying to get their work placed in libraries. Libraries are still some of the best places to connect with readers. Any author, traditional or independent, can connect with a library to ask about organizing author events though the answer isn’t always positive. Such opportunities often open doorways to getting an author’s work more seriously considered for shelf placement. My personal experience in this area has gone remarkably well despite my setbacks. I’ve had the chance to host reader discussions and take part in author panels and expos at many libraries. Aside from differences in opinion related to what does or does not belong on a library’s shelf, librarians have proven to be great supporters of author visits. I realize that a lot of my success has come from the fact that I’m traditionally published. I tend to introduce myself that way by letting the library know that they already have my titles on their shelves. In my experience, readers will most often want to lend a large portion of the discussion to my independent material.

The question still remains, however, how does this all pan out for the independent authors who don’t have a traditional writing career following them into the indie publishing world? What chance do they have of getting noticed, of having librarians take them seriously enough to offer shelf placement? Perhaps my answer here may sound a bit naïve, but I’ve been a published author for more than 11 years. In that time, reading trends have changed; new reading genres have materialized; new reading formats and ways to publish have been invented. Throughout this wealth of change, one thing, for me, has remained constant—the readers.

READERS
Once again, the traditional world has benefited me greatly. I brought with me into the independent market an impressive number of readers that helped make this leap a lot more successful a lot more quickly than it would have been otherwise. As I stated earlier, readers really only care about one
name on the cover—the author’s. Still, that doesn’t mean that authors can or should take their readers for granted. Even in the indie world, rules exist. They exist for those who care about presenting a quality product meant to please readers and enhance their reading experience. Readers who finish an author’s work and claim that the experience was an enjoyable one are readers who will return for more of that author’s work. They will read that title in print or online. They will bombard the author with questions about the release date for a follow-up work, how the author came up with the idea, and what else the author has written that the reader can enjoy until the aforementioned follow-up work is complete. In short, they want access to that author’s work, and that usually means they want it in their libraries.

When all is said and done, librarians and authors—all authors—have a common interest—the readers. Librarians strive to stock their shelves with the latest, greatest reads as well as the most revered classics. They want the most popular magazines on the shelves because that’s what their readers want; they want the nicest, most durable (and yes, cost-conscious) furniture in place so that their patrons can have a comfortable place to sit. Authors, like libraries, want to provide a great story for the readers. The readers often make this possible when they make suggestions for library purchases.

Readers have a huge amount of influence when it comes to the choice of what a library stocks on its shelves. I often browse WorldCat just to get a glimpse of how my titles—usually my traditional titles—are doing in the library world. It’s amazing to see how many of my self-published works are in libraries in places I’ve never even heard of. I owe such a great deal of that to my readers. Relying on reader suggestions to move your books into libraries may seem like going along at a snail’s pace, especially for the independent author who has yet to build a wide-reaching audience; but it is a steady route not to be dismissed.

**OTHER AVENUES**

As technology advances, so do the avenues for library placement. Printed materials are not the only resources libraries provide their users. Many readers are now acquiring lots of their material without ever setting foot in the library. Given this truth, libraries want to make sure they are still a viable outlet for readers who otherwise might feel the library has nothing to offer them. Libraries have made partnerships with platforms such as
OverDrive, which provide access to digital works for library patrons. Such platforms also provide indie authors with a way to bring their work into libraries as well. Of course, the material must still be purchased via regular library channels, but authors are permitted to have their work evaluated for addition into the platform’s catalog. As it pertains to printed work, many on-demand publishers have partnerships that get their releases into libraries. CreateSpace offers such a service provided an author uses an ISBN provided by CreateSpace as opposed to the author’s own since this will list CreateSpace as the book’s publisher instead of the author.

**IN CLOSING**

The landscape is definitely changing in terms of the library/indie publications tug of war. I find evidence of this whenever I check holdings of my independent titles. Those titles are appearing in greater numbers in libraries across the country. Readers have been the driving force behind this change in my situation. I am noticing that some libraries now seem to be taking the reins from my readers and are placing my indie releases on order shortly after they become available. While I attribute this success to the efforts of my readers, I feel that this shift is happening across the board. Independently published titles are garnering an increasing awareness and with it the respect once reserved for traditionally published works. Reviewers are recognizing the talent and diligence of indie authors while libraries are making more room on their shelves or e-book platforms for such deserving works. It is all a work in progress, and the possibilities seem extremely positive.