

THE CONVERSATION

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Self-publishing matters – don't let anyone tell you otherwise

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A long list of commercial success stories has emerged from the self-publishing boom, sometimes with sales in the millions. Nicolas DECOOPMAN

Unless you are a mountain hermit or a committed Luddite, you will have noticed there has been a massive growth in self-publishing activity over the last decade or so.

Self-publishing has well and truly arrived, spawning not only thousands of book titles but also a number of online publishing platforms (Smashwords, Kindle Direct, CreateSpace, Lulu etc), an international festival (the International Self-Publishing Festival) and even an MA program in a British university.

Research by Katherine Bode of Australian National University shows that books by self-published authors made up 7% of all Australian novels published in the 1990s and 4% of all those published in the 2000s.

Other research suggests that close to a third of all eBook sales are by self-published authors. A long list of commercial success stories has emerged from the self-publishing domain, with some self-published authors achieving sales in the millions.

One such author, Amanda Hocking, writer of multiple paranormal romance novels, achieved sales exceeding 1.5 million in just 18 months. Sales like these totally eclipse those made by some esteemed literary figures over their entire careers.

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The idea that self-published books struggle to find an audience is not true of all, and perhaps not even true of most. It would be more precise to say that in the current climate most books, no matter how they come to be published, have to have a strong marketing strategy to find a readership.



kate hiscock

If anything, the convergence of the digital revolution with a growing scepticism of corporate publishing among today's cynical readers has given self-published eBooks an advantage. The internet provides a plethora of marketing opportunities for independent authors, such as online writing groups and book clubs and, of course, social media.

The author-reader relationship has become easier and more intimate. The internet has enabled writers (irrespective of how they were published) to participate in online reading communities that promote their writing and build their audience.

Poor focus

Despite a large amount of commentary about self-publishing as a phenomena in the media (particularly online), it is rare to see self-published books reviewed in mainstream publications and rarer to see self-publishing treated as a serious focus of scholarly research.

It is still stigmatised, still seen as amateur, even as illegitimate. An ongoing criticism of the self-publishing boom is that it is swamping the market with low quality, badly edited books. This criticism persists despite the fact that many self-published books are professionally edited and proof-read in the same way as commercially published works.

The stigma attached to self-publishing is, surprisingly, a relatively recent phenomena (historically speaking), arising around the same time that publishing houses were transforming into corporations.

Before the corporatisation of the book industry, self-publishing was the route chosen by a number of the most successful, and acclaimed, authors.

In fact, some of the greatest works in literature were self-published. Charles Dickens published his novels chapter by chapter in his own magazine. Walt Whitman's ground-breaking *Leaves of Grass* (1855) was self-published. Other significant literary figures whose writing was self-published include Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Marcel Proust.

It is also worth noting that traditional (or commercial) publication does not necessarily guarantee quality. Surely no-one would suggest that *Leaves of Grass* is of less quality than *Eat, Pray, Love*?

More recently, a number of high-profile, traditionally published authors, notably Stephen King, are choosing to publish some of their work themselves. The choice to do so is rarely a financial one.

Sometimes it is about releasing writing deemed by corporate publishing houses as inappropriate for their imprints, often because it is of a genre classified as “non-commercial” (such as the short story or novella). It is just as often about releasing work on platforms the big publishing houses have not yet embraced (such as mobile devices) or taking control of the process and making it more personal, less corporate.



Marcel Proust in 1900.

You're so vain

Despite the venerable history of self-publishing, authors who choose this pathway today are marked with the stigma embodied in the term “vanity publishing”. Perhaps because of this stigma, literary critics and literature scholars, on the whole, continue to behave as though self-publishing were a fringe activity, the second-class citizen of the publishing world.

Self-published authors are routinely labelled “amateur authors”, as though being amateur, which only means to be an unpaid participant in an activity, were a reason for derision. Olympic athletes are amateurs and we certainly don't treat them with the same off-handedness. Being highly paid for a thing does not make one talented or a specialist. One needs only look at Kim Kardashian to see that.





Ed Yourdon

One of the reasons for this continued stigmatisation of self-publishing may be gender. Corporate publishing, particularly in the genre of literary fiction, has long had a very low glass ceiling.

Research by Alison Baverstock and Jackie Steinitz of Kingston University in the UK shows that 65% of self-publishers are women. With the traditional publishing houses heavily favouring male authors, self-publishing offers women writers the opportunity to share their work and gain readers.

In terms of gender at least, self-publishing has democratised the publications process and exposed readers to women writers they may have never discovered otherwise. Surely this is reason enough for critics and scholars to treat self-publishing more seriously?

Critics

When it comes to literary critics, the continued lack of attention to self-published works is somewhat understandable. Reviewers have long relied on traditional publishers to provide them with *worthy* titles to review. Without the guidance of the book industry's gatekeepers (agents, editors and publishers), how are critics to choose what to review from among the huge number of titles published each year?

If critics were to agree to review self-published works, how would they choose those works, how would they know which books *deserve* to be reviewed?

Critics are not, and should not be, in the business of reviewing only those books that they like or would normally choose to read. They are in the business of reviewing those works that are of cultural significance, works of literature that are important.

Given the sheer volume of self-published books, it is clear that self-publishing is culturally significant. But which individual works themselves are important? How do reviewers, who have never used sales as a way to determine the value of a book, choose from among the literally tens of thousands of self-published titles made available each year? The answer to this question is not obvious.

One place to start might be to look at which self-published books have generated strong online communities. Literature scholars, and scholars of publishing itself, might also begin there, observing and analysing those book communities and using them to select which self-published books merit further discussion and study.

Another approach might be to wait and see which self-published works continue, over time, to connect with readers. That has always been one of the most reliable ways that scholars and critics define a “classic”.

Although those in corporate publishing houses and some critics may still consider self-published works to be of less quality than traditionally published books, it is clear by the sheer number of titles and their sales figures that self-publishing is here to stay, and a force to be reckoned with.

This cultural and economic significance of the self-publishing phenomena means that it should, finally, be taken seriously by scholars.

Besides, ignoring it is no longer possible, nor smart.

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