

E-Books - An Opportunity for Authors, But Not the Way You Think by Linda Rohrbough

I've heard people say that in ten years we'll all be reading books on e-readers, and paper books will be a thing of the past. Horse hockey. But I will say that e-books are an opportunity for writers. Let me give you a little background, and then I'll tell you where the opportunities are and why.

I have a unique perspective here, which gives me a bit of an advantage. I was a reporter covering technology for an international computer news network when the VCR came out. And all the industry pundits said the VCR spelled the end of the movie theatre. Well, we all know how that came out. If anything, movie theatres are bigger (literally) than ever. What did happen as a result of the VCR is this: an entire market opened up for movies that had never existed before.

All the folks who couldn't get their movies into the traditional movie theater channels started opening small film companies in cities besides Hollywood and producing films aimed at the video (now DVD) market. I've personally met people who own these family-owned film companies and they have investors and make a living just like the big studios, on a smaller scale. And there are a number of Hollywood-produced films that didn't make money in theatres but did make money when they went to the video market.

Can you see where I'm going with this when it comes to books and e-readers? I know a gal who started a ghostwriting business who says her clients are publishing e-books, but they're actually making money off the print versions. They give away the entire e-book on their website, people read some or all of it, and then they *buy* the print version. I also recently met a publisher who started a small press based on this same principle. He publishes the e-book and asks for payment after the reader reads the book. He said he's been stunned at how much people pay, as much as \$10 in some cases, after they've already read the book. Then, when the demand is high enough, he goes to press and sells paper copies, often to the same readers.

The book *Still Alice*, a fictional first-person account of someone with Alzheimer's, is the highest profile book demonstrating this new trend. The author, Lisa Genova, went to writers' conferences trying to find an agent and editor through traditional means. Genova had credentials as a neuroscientist, but no one was buying. So she published it herself on iUniverse for about \$400. The book took off, got the attention of an agent who signed her, and then sold the book earlier this year to the Pocket division of Simon & Schuster for a half-million dollar advance.

The title just hit the stores in the last couple of months, with a rush printing job that shows. *Publisher's Weekly's* review was not favorable. "Genova's prose style is clumsy and her dialogue heavy-handed. This novel will appeal to those dealing with the disease and may prove helpful, but beyond the heartbreaking record of illness there's little here to remember." So the publishing experts clearly didn't like the book, but the emotional pull

made it sell—no big surprise there. Here's the point: the electronic version made way for the print version. And the print version is selling well.

The rub is that there aren't yet enough readers of e-books. My contention is that once e-readers go to color, you won't be able to keep them on the shelves. My proof is what happened with Apple and the PC in the 1980's. Apple lost market share when Steve Jobs refused to go to color monitors because the resolution was so bad. And it was - CGA resolution was horrible. Until then, the PC and the Mac were neck-and-neck in sales, but when the PC went to color, the Mac lost market share and has yet to get it back. Even now, Macs are still at about ten percent of the market.

People love color. Books' pages are not in color, of course, but their covers certainly are. E-readers are about to come out in color, and it will blow this whole thing wide open. Fujitsu just announced the Flepia, a \$1,000 color e-book reader. Plastic Logic is about to come out with Que, a color reader, and their black and white version will be sold next to Barnes and Noble's Nook.

E-readers make reading fun and, more importantly for the working writer, they make buying books quick and easy. I have to be careful—I can blow sixty bucks on books with my Kindle without blinking an eye. In a bookstore I might be tempted, but it's more likely that I'll think twice on the long walk up to the register with an armload of hardbacks.

This trend is also going to open doors for small publishers. But don't get fooled by subsidiary presses that want you to pay them and imply you'll get more attention from traditional publishing houses once your book has an ISBN number and a shiny cover. Once you do that, all traditional publishers want to know about are sales. And they can look up sales in a New York minute on Neilson's electronic book sales tracking service BookScan. So if you can't show them sales of fifteen thousand copies or more, or several thousand copies sold into book clubs in less than a year, then you've just slammed the door shut on your book.

As they say: when the tide comes in, all the boats go up. And I've always said that where there are problems, there are opportunities. Like video, I believe the demand for books, especially fiction, is about to take off. And that, my writer friends, means opportunity.

Get your books polished up and ready. It's coming.

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books, and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda's latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo Lifelong Books, March 2008). Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com

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