

Self-Published Novelist Beats the Odds (via Book Clubs and Video Conferencing)

by Linda Rohrbough

Every once in a while I hear a self-publishing story that gets my attention. Recently, I heard about an author who'd tried to get an agent for about five years, finally self-published her novel, then landed an agent who took the book to auction. She landed a two-book hardcover deal that made *Publisher's Weekly*. Lots of people self-publish, so what got the attention of the agent and the publishers? I set up an interview to find out. The magic words: book clubs.

The author is Maryann McFadden (<http://www.MaryannMcFadden.com>) and her mainstream novel is *The Richest Season*. Maryann told me she had experience doing article work as a journalist. But when her husband lost his job, she quit writing and went into real estate for ten years.

When she decided to start writing again, she had an idea for a novel which took three and a half years to write. For five years Maryann sent the book to agents and publishers while she carried a three-ring binder with the printed pages for family and friends to read. Everyone was enthusiastic, except the agents and publishing houses. During that period, one agent picked her up, but couldn't make a living and quit.

When she turned fifty, Maryann decided to publish the book herself. She didn't want it to look like a typical POD (print on demand – the publishing industry's term for any book that's self-published), so she avoided Publish America or iUniverse and found a small press in California. She was picky about making sure the cover looked professional, and she had a line edit done of the manuscript. Contacting independent booksellers, she set up signings in a number of states over eight months, promoting heavily in the local media and donating as many as ten copies of the book for the bookstores to raffle, sell, or give away.

But the independents put her on to reader book clubs and that's where she made a splash. Her sister knew webcam technology (this was pre-Skype), so Maryann offered book clubs either webcam meetings or phone interviews. Her first book club meeting took place via video at an independent bookstore in Florida with Maryann at her sister's Cape Cod cottage, where the opening of the book is set.

“The club had dinner and snacks that revolved around the book, including a chocolate turtle dessert. We toasted each other on-screen.”

Word-of-mouth helped and in an eight-month period she did twenty-five independent bookstore signings on-site, and appearances with over forty reader book clubs. She made sure each book club appearance was coordinated through the independent booksellers.

Exhausted, but with two thousand books sold, she went home with the advice from a bookstore owner still ringing in her ears: start writing again. She did, and also got restarted on the agent route. “I felt like I’d proven my book had a market.”

Several agents did contact Maryann. “One wanted me to add humor and make it Chick Lit. Another wanted me to pull a character entirely out.” Agent Victoria Sanders was interested and asked for a six-week exclusive to consider the book. Of course, she ended up taking two months, then asked Maryann to add some material to the beginning. Maryann already had the same feedback from the book clubs, so she agreed to the changes, and Sanders not only represented Maryann but took the book to auction.

The suddenness of it felt surreal to Maryann, even though this was exactly what she’d been working for. The agent sent out copies to publishing houses on a Thursday in the Spring of 2007 and they had several offers on Tuesday when the auction rolled around. Hyperion won.

The trade paperback version of *The Richest Season* is out now, along with Maryann's second hardcover, *So Happy Together*. Her first book has been translated into Italian and German, and a Spanish translation is in the works. Plus she’s under contract for a third book.

Believing in herself was paramount. “I can’t tell you how close I came to giving up. When I wrote my first book, I had no vacations.” When Maryann sent the manuscript out, “The responses got me so excited and the rejections got me so frustrated. I’d go to book signings, buy the author’s book and give them a copy of mine, asking them to read it. My secret dream was that someone would notice it.”

When none of that worked, Maryann took stock. “I had to ask myself, what did I really want?” One writer’s blog said she won the “literary lottery.” But Maryann laughs and says it was all about hard work. Fortunately, it’s hard work any writer—self-published or not—can learn from.

Sidebar:

1. Detailed instructions for authors on how to set up video conference with Skype. (Some of this is a restatement of the obvious, but it makes for a good checklist): children’s book author Kate Messener blogs about video via Skype: (<http://donnagephart.blogspot.com/2010/03/skype-with-kate-messner-top-6-12-list.html>) and Darcy Pattison talks about setting up lighting and makeup. (<http://www.darcypattison.com/marketing/skype-tips-be-prepared/>)
2. Websites to sign up to be a Skype author, mostly aimed at schools and libraries (some of these offer payment for visiting authors, others are volunteer):
Skype An Author Network (<http://skypeanauthor.wetpaint.com/>)
Visiting Authors (<http://www.visitingauthors.com/>)

Linda Lowery and Richard Keep
(<http://www.lindalowery.com/content/blogcategory/24/17/>)
Connecting Authors (<http://www.connectingauthors.com/>)

3. Don't forget to use search engines such as Google (<http://www.google.com>) to find book clubs and author video conference opportunities.

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 Linda's website. (<http://www.LindaRohrbough.com>).

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