

## **Self Publishing: Pros and Cons** **Why Self-publishing Might be Right for You**

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In the times of our fore-fathers, self-publishing was the norm. Ben Franklin was printer and publisher, as well as writer. As big publishing houses surged, however, self-publishing became confused with "vanity" press, in which untutored writers spend great sums just to see their work in print, like *Great Aunt Tillie's Memoirs*. So, self-publishing developed a justifiably bad name.

There are still purists who will say, "That's not real publishing." But that probably depends upon the quality of the work. Many authors have first self-published and eventually become bestselling authors, like Gertrude Stein, Zane Grey, Stephen Crane, John Grisham. Even Frank McCourt claimed that when he started, all he wanted was to have a Library of Congress number.

Self-publishing has not the same glory as a three-book option from Random House, distributors will not hawk your books (though that means they don't get a percentage, either) you may never be on the *New York Times* bestseller list. But even Random House no longer coddles its authors as it did in the days of Hemingway's hand-written and unedited manuscripts.

The publishing field is changing rapidly these days. Big publishers are vying with books emerging online, hand-held readers, audio format, or independent publishers. On Demand or E-Publishing are also methods of self-publishing, though they cost more, and take more of the profits because others are involved. Today, self-publishing is just one of many ways to get a book out there, and the so-called "stigma" has pretty much gone the way of Great Aunt Tillie.

That being said, there are still major factors to consider before deciding if self-publishing is for you. Though I could teach a class on how to do it, this discussion is focused on why you should, or should not, consider going it on your own. After five novels, I've found the advantages of self-publishing are having freedom, speed, and control over your own work, as well as meeting wonderful people who become fans.

Perhaps explaining why I chose this route will help others make a decision.

With my first novel, *Mutti's War*, I wanted to do it right. I went to conference, found a critique group, edited extensively, won Pikes Peak Fiction Contest, sent my query letter, and was thrilled when Chapel Hills requested the whole manuscript. I waited seven months, during which I could do nothing except wait, so I started on novel # 2. *Mutti* finally came back, with a lovely letter: "We all read the novel, we all loved it, the characters are so well drawn, blah, blah, blah, HOWEVER, we're a small company booked out three years, and we assume you'd like to have it sooner."

Okay, at least they liked it. It wasn't a bomb.

Next, an editor from New York liked my elevator speech and took the entire manuscript. Nine months later, I got back another lovely letter. "We all read it, we all loved it, it simply must be published, blah, blah, blah, HOWEVER, it's too realistic for us." What the heck does that mean? How does one FIX "too realistic?" I'd spent four years on research to be sure it WAS realistic. Did I need to have Hitler escape on a white stallion?

I was discouraged from wasting two years of my elderly life waiting for somebody ELSE to do something over which I had no control. A PPW mentor, Jimmie Butler, suggested I publish the first novel at Industrial Printers here in the Springs (Mannie is a God-send) and, after I'd sold a few thousand copies, I could approach the publishers with a proven record. A speaking engagement was coming up, the book was ready in ten days, and I sold out. *Mutti's War* is now in its fourth printing.

Why, then, didn't I approach the publishers after it sold well? I figured I'd just send the next novel through the "query and wait" process. However, readers asked me to have the second novel ready for their next reunion. Then the third novel wasn't even finished when I received advance orders from those who had read #1 and #2. I didn't know how to tell them it would take another two to five years to do it the "right" way, so I self-published #3 for them and figured I'd go the long route for #4. But by now, my audience expects another book every year, so I'm in my own little squirrel cage. I'll probably never have time to do the regular publisher routine.

But I've discovered some nice perks in self-publishing that you don't have in the time-honored query way.

### PRO: Perks in self-publishing

I can choose my own tide, my own cover, set my own price, and choose my own marketing plan. I noticed that friends who had a big publisher still had to do much of their own promotion, and prices set by a publisher were a bit high for my readers, so why not continue what was working for me? It's quick, and the people who matter most to me like my stories enough to keep coming back for more. There's also a fifth perk. Big publishers, and even on-demand and e-companies, make you purchase your own discounted books back from them for special appearances or sales opportunities. I couldn't see much benefit in that! If you own your own book, that's not a problem. You also won't need a lawyer to write or interpret contracts.

### CON: Problems in self-publishing

You will not have the backing of a publisher arranging for distributors to place your books in bookstores. While publishers finance a lower marketing budget these days, you will still get some help at first. Neither of these things will be available to you as a self-published author. (But it is not so hard to do it yourself. Local independent bookstores like to help local authors get recognition.) A publishing house will send out advanced copies for review and cover blurbs. As a self-published author, you will have to find your own reviewers. (Again, this is not as hard as it may sound.) Another problem is that once you are published by a big company, you will receive your checks and the publisher will be primarily responsible for the life of the book, your royalties, and such. But, if you self-publish, you probably won't sit back and let the royalties roll in. Most likely you will be involved in your sales for the life of the book. If you want the publisher to do that for you, self-publishing is not for you.

### CONSIDER self-publishing IF...

- ...you have a strong critique group. You need good feedback to be sure your work is ready.
- ...you have a built-in audience that fits your work and purpose. My "niche" audience grounded among Vietnam pilots, Cavalry museums, Cold War and WWII vets, DoDDS Overseas teachers, Spooks and Spies. Because the books I write deal with military people, they're always waiting for the next story. Without that niche audience, you'd be stuck with a garage full of books for a lifetime, unless you had 50,000 relatives.
- ...you aren't afraid to be in front of an audience, as speaking engagements sell books.
- ...you aren't concerned about being on the bestseller list or buying a yacht.
- ...the big publisher route is too time-consuming for where you are in life, as in "getting very old."

...you know your purpose for writing. Perhaps you want the book for a personal reason, not for a general audience. In teaching classes on Memoir, I encourage everyone to get their story written before they die and it's lost. Family history is precious. A friend recently lost his wife. I encouraged him to write about their life together for their grandchildren. The effort helped him through a devastating year of grief, and his kids were delighted with a few copies from Industrial Printers. Your purpose in writing is key, whether you need five books or 50,000.

**You should NOT self-publish if...**

...you're unwilling to study the craft, or you can't take constructive criticism. Take the classes, do the hard work of editing, enter some contests, and read. Otherwise, you'll just be "vanity press" reincarnated.

...you are young and healthy and can afford to wait for the plum of that Random House contract for umpteen thousand books, and you desire that bestseller tide. Go for it.

...you've had rejection after rejection. Don't think you have the masterpiece of the century, and "they" just don't see it. You may need the changes they suggest. Make the changes, wait for positive feedback, and put in more craft time.

...you don't know your audience (this is probably most important). Don't try self-publishing unless you have a niche audience that is waiting for your work. I'm fortunate to have those connections with my military audience. I couldn't self publish without them.

My age plays a big part in my decision, but mostly it is my purpose in writing. I find it fun to have complete control of my work and to tell stories I feel need to be told to people who want to read them. That's my goal, not the million-dollar contract or fame and fortune. If you first find your receptive audience, and do your homework, you might decide self-publishing would be right for you, too. It's been quite satisfying for me.

### **Questions you should ask yourself:**

- Where am I in life?
- What is my purpose and goal for writing?
- What is the nature of my audience?
- Do I have experience for editing and marketing?

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