

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytimes.com/reprints for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.



May 20, 2011

The Case for Self-Publishing

By NEAL POLLACK

Many thousands of years ago, when I was still a whelpish newspaper reporter in Chicago, I did a short profile of a retired television repairman who'd written a memoir entitled "The Perilous Life of Boris B. Gursky." As a boy in Ukraine, Gursky said, he was stepped on by a horse; when he was a young man in Mexico, his stepfather had tried to murder him; and when he was a middle-aged man in Chicago, his ex-wife had clawed his face with her fingernails and threatened him with a loaded pistol. Most perilously, Gursky suffered from prostate cancer. He wrote, "My body had become so sensitive from staying too long in an environment surrounded with radiation from television sets."

The book clocked in at fewer than 150 pages. Gursky produced it through a vanity press that he'd seen advertised in *Writer's Digest*. They sent him a booklet containing a few basic editorial instructions and charged him \$10,000. He mailed copies to the Elgin, Ill., public library, the White House and everyone in the United States who shared his last name. Such was the state of self-publishing in 1995.

In addition to a great many bad books lost to the sands of time, there's also a long history of successful self-published authors getting big deals with major houses. Today, though, self-publication crackles with possibility as never before. Witness the March news that the thriller author Barry Eisler had backed out of a half-million-dollar deal with St. Martin's Press, his new publisher. He'd decided that he could, over time, make more money publishing without their help. Conversely, young Amanda Hocking, she of the vast success generated from self-publishing nine e-books, accepted a seven-figure advance from St. Martin's, the same publisher that had just lost Eisler. Hocking issued a sassy statement that she was tired of answering e-mails all the time and just wanted to write. One way or another, it suddenly seemed that self-publishing was the key to infinite auctorial riches.

It's unlikely that such riches will reach me, but I've decided to give self-publishing a try myself. It seems to be what the kids and Barry Eisler are doing. Within a month or so, I'll finish the first draft of a short novel. Sometime soon after, I plan to release it as an e-book, and there may be a limited-edition print run. We'll see what happens from there.

I wouldn't necessarily recommend this to a first-time author. A self-published book is almost certainly going to end up on the digital slush pile, with fewer readers than the average blog post. But for a writer like me, which is to say, most working writers — midcareer, midlist, middle-aged, more or less middlebrow, and somewhat Internet savvy — self-publishing seems to make a lot of sense at this point. Early in my career, because of some lucky breaks and a kinder economy, I was able to get advances that helped me support my family over the months it took to write a book. I haven't been a huge best seller, and I've never seen a residual check except for an independently published book of crime stories that I edited, and that was only

because I got nothing up front. But I've built a modest audience and a name. Now that the advances are smaller and the technology is available, why not start appealing directly to those readers?

Stephen King churned up a squall more than a decade ago when he attempted to self-publish a novel called "The Plant," delivering it to fans electronically in separate chunks. But that wasn't a harbinger of revolution. King still publishes his books with a major house, as do all other brand-name authors. Corporate publishers do certain types of books, the ones that have a chance of landing their authors on the "Today" show or on the discount table at Costco, quite well. The big-publishing model can work. I currently have a contract, albeit a modest one, to write a nonfiction book for an established publisher, one that's mainstream in concept and execution, with a clear marketing hook. But most books that corporate publishers release will fail to make money, both for the writer and the company.

My self-published product may not be the easiest proposition for mainstream publishers. It will be short, it's about Jews and basketball and bumbling fascists, doesn't involve teenage vampire sex or the Knights Templars, and wouldn't be likely to sustain a \$9.99 download price, which is the low end of what publishers are charging now for new e-books. Here are the economics: I'm going to charge five bucks, or \$4.99 a download. For every book sold, my online vendor will send me 70 percent of the revenue. In raw dollar amounts, that's more than three times what I'd get from a mainstream publisher for each paperback sale. If I manage to score a thousand downloads, which I almost certainly will at that price point (I have a large family), I'll make 3,500 bucks, and if I get 5,000 downloads, I'm looking at \$17,500. Quickly, I'll have earned the equivalent of a pleasant advance for this book. The vendor will pay me monthly, and will allow me to adjust the amount I charge in case my initial calculations are wrong.

Overhead will also be low. If I need to cover upfront costs, I can always wage a modest campaign on the grassroots online fund-raising phenomenon Kickstarter, which has worked for me before. Meanwhile, a guy from my fantasy football league, a talented editor who put out dozens of works of crime fiction when he ran an indie noir publishing house in Los Angeles, where I live, will be editing the manuscript for nothing. He's now interested in learning the e-publishing game. In exchange, he says, if the book really starts to sell, I can buy him a few beers. I like those terms.

There will be other expenses to consider — cover art, a plane ticket to the East Coast if I decide to do readings and on-the-ground media in New York and Philadelphia, where most of the book is set — but such expenses can be handled by bartering and frequent-flier miles. As for publicity, I'm going to have to get out there and sell the book myself, which I've done before. I won't be appearing on "The View," or even "The Talk," but that wasn't going to happen anyway. Therefore, I'm trying an experiment. I encourage other writers to join me so I don't feel like a total idiot.

I'm sure it'll go well enough, and am almost as sure that I'll self-publish again, because it seems that's the way the world is going. As the late Boris B. Gursky once told me: "When I start doing something I never quit. I keep doing it, doing it, day and night, doing it until I finish. I've been like that all my life. That is my way."

Neal Pollack is the author of several books, including, most recently, "Stretch." His self-published novel "Jewball" will appear later this year on the Amazon Kindle Store.