
BYPASSING THE MIDDLEMAN

A Primer for Traditional Authors Looking to Self-Publish

By Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

In an ever-evolving literary landscape, where the traditional gatekeepers of publishing houses are no longer the only route to getting your voice heard, self-publishing has emerged as a viable and increasingly attractive option for established and aspiring writers alike. If you are a traditionally published author considering this path, you may find that self-publishing not only offers a sense of autonomy—allowing you direct control over content, cover design, and marketing strategy—but it also presents an avenue for financial gain without the intermediary cut.

The most recent Authors Guild author income survey revealed that full-time self-published authors who have been publishing since at least 2018 reported a median income of \$24,000 compared to \$13,700 in 2018, a 76 percent increase. The median income of full-time self-published authors in 2022 was \$12,800 from books and \$15,000 total including book and author-related activities. Traditional authors had a median income of \$10,000 from books alone but \$20,000 from books and other author-related work.

While traditionally published authors did earn more in 2022 from non-book author-related income than book related income, self-published authors earned more from book income. This means traditionally published authors must do a lot of other writing-related work to support themselves.

In many ways, self-publishing is a democratized playing field, where success is determined not by a select few in boardrooms but by the quality of your work and your ability to connect directly with readers. Whether you're looking to breathe new life into a shelved manuscript or desiring more creative and financial control, self-publishing can serve as a pivotal next step in your writing career. For most self-published writers, none of this is news. But if you're like me, a traditionally published author who is just waking up to the magic of self-publishing, read on.

As a traditionally published author, my own old-fashioned ideas about self-publishing took a turn when, over the past few months, my pen pal

Josh told me about his experience. Last year, Josh made \$10,000 from his ten self-published books on Amazon. This may not sound like much, but Josh has limited resources, no benefactors, and no bank account to speak of. He's been in prison for the last 22 years, since he was a teenager.

"Other guys here have books they want to publish but they say they can't because they don't have my resources," Josh says. "What resources?"

He found his publishing niche: How-to books for the incarcerated population. Now, he makes enough to send money to his daughter and attend to his own needs.

"If I can do it, anyone can," Josh says.

One thing that makes this possible is Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), an e-book publishing platform that many writers use to self-publish and get their work in front of readers. Full-time self-published authors who used Kindle to reach readers outperformed full-time traditionally published authors on that platform by 67 percent in 2022. Knowing how to best use the platform is key to those earnings. Since KDP was launched in 2007, many other e-reader platforms have made it easy to reach readers on other devices, too. Apple Books, Google Play, Barnes & Noble, and Kobo all have direct-publishing platforms. And aggregators such as Draft2Digital have emerged to make it easy to reach several platforms from one login.

The market for support services has also evolved. Many of the earliest self-published books submitted to my podcast *Writers on Writing* had poor covers and clumsy layouts. But as self-publishing grew, so did the market for editors and designers. And programs such as Canva make it easy for people who know little about graphic design to dabble with book cover templates and easy-to-use visual tools.

Earlier this year, Bowker—the official ISBN agency for the U.S. that provides resources to help authors publish, distribute, and promote their books—released data supporting the fact that the self-publishing segment is thriving, with fiction as the most popular category, followed by juvenile nonfiction and juvenile fiction. Bookstat, a collector of online sales data from Amazon, Apple, and

IN MANY WAYS, SELF-PUBLISHING IS A DEMOCRATIZED PLAYING FIELD, WHERE SUCCESS IS DETERMINED NOT BY A SELECT FEW IN BOARDROOMS BUT BY THE QUALITY OF YOUR WORK AND YOUR ABILITY TO CONNECT DIRECTLY WITH READERS.

Barnes & Noble, shows self-published authors capturing 50 percent of e-book unit sales last year. Not too shabby.

Not every genre performs equally well, however. Romance, fantasy, and sci-fi do the best for self-published authors. Mystery and thriller markets are evolving. But for children's fiction, young adult, and literary fiction, traditional publishing may still be the way to go. According to Jane Friedman, part of the reason for this is that the "literary audience still prefers print," and "educators, librarians, and others who are in a position to introduce books to children are using trade publications, reviews, and other traditional methods to guide their selections." But if you're an author who is already known in these circles, or you have good business acumen, it's still possible to make it work.

Deciding To Self-publish

Writers jump into self-publishing for a variety of reasons: Frustrations with traditional publishers' timelines, difficulty in getting an agent and/or sell-

BOOKSTAT, A COLLECTOR OF ONLINE SALES DATA FROM AMAZON, APPLE, AND BARNES & NOBLE, SHOWS SELF-PUBLISHED AUTHORS CAPTURING 50 PERCENT OF E-BOOK UNIT SALES LAST YEAR.

ing to a publisher, or the desire to bring a traditionally published out-of-print book back into print.

When my first book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman's Guide to Igniting the Writer Within* (Harcourt, 2004), went out of print a few years back, my agent for that book said, "You could give it a new life. I've seen some books do very well." So, I went about buying the rights and getting the book back into print.

Award-winning radio journalist Kitty Felde's first book, *Welcome to Washington Fina Mendoza*, was published by a small press, yet she felt she was doing most of the work herself. So, after two years, she bought back the rights and republished under Chesapeake Press, her own imprint. She loves the freedom of making decisions about what she prints and how it will look.

"You feel empowered," says Felde.

Gayle Carline had a similar experience. She was unhappy with the lack of control at a small press. "Amazon had just launched CreateSpace [now closed and integrated into KDP] and e-books were beginning to flood the market," she says. "The stigma of self-publishing was disappearing. I have much more control over my cover art, pricing, release dates, publicity, and marketing, etc."

Stephen Siciliano agrees that the best thing

about self-publishing is "artistic control, from cover to cover. Not everyone [who reads] cares or knows about self-publishing. You've written a book about such and such, and if you put it before the right eyes, it will fire for them."

While Erika Kelly was waiting for her publisher to decide on her next contract, and her agent was shopping a new series, she panicked. Time was moving on and she worried the momentum she'd created with her previous three books would falter and readers would forget about her. "I figured I'd try self-publishing just to see what it was like," she says. "Big shock: I loved it! I loved not waiting for someone to decide when my book would be published. I loved the creative control over my covers and blurbs. And I loved making real money."

With more than 100 romances and mysteries published traditionally via William Morrow, Berkley, DAW, Fivestar, and Walker Books, Jacqueline Diamond ventured into self-publishing when her books went out of print and rights reverted to her, beginning in 2009. "Digital publishing was fairly new," she says, "and it seemed a good opportunity to return these novels to print and monetize them."

The efficiency of self-publishing made Christine Yared consider it. "The query process left me with less time for writing," she says. "I questioned whether agents, most of whom were younger than me, were interested in representing a woman who would be publishing her first book in her sixties." She also doesn't have a huge social media following. Many self-published authors do, but she is still able to sell books without it.

But Is It lucrative?

For my pen pal Josh, whose home has been a cement cubicle for more than two decades, \$10,000 is a lot of money to make in a year. But how important is money derived from self-publishing to authors? To most, money from selling books is gravy and not to be depended upon; few depend on that income to pay the rent or mortgage. For some, though, self-publishing has exceeded expectations.

Amazon paid more than \$500 million in

Kindle Unlimited royalties this past year—clearly readers are engaged. And self-published authors are keeping 100 percent of the net royalties from their e-books, as opposed to a typical 25 percent of net in a traditional publishing contract.

“The income I earn as a self-published author is vastly greater than what I made with a Big Five,” says Kelly. “While the traditional publisher shoulders much of the workload with covers, blurbs, and edits, I still prefer the ability to make immediate changes, to swerve when a cover isn’t performing or when a reader points out a continuity issue. Having control over my intellectual property is key.”

Biography and memoir writer Robert Rosen, who is also traditionally published, says, “The big difference between traditional publishing and self-publishing is I make five or six times as much money each time I sell a book I publish, and I get paid every month.”

Thriller and sci-fi author Brett Battles agrees. “I have made much more from my indie books than my traditionally published books—though I believe that starting with traditionally published books gave me a built-in audience when I went into indie.”

For Karolynn St-Pierre, self-publishing is *very* lucrative. “I produce six books a year, all close to 100,000 words each. Last year, I hit a half million dollars gross. I won’t make that this year, but I’ll still clear \$300,000. Self-publishing isn’t for everyone, but for those who can make it work, it can be a very good business.”

Staying power is part of it. “If you can build enough momentum and sales as an indie author,” says Carline, “you get paid every month, and your profits are much higher than if you are traditionally published. You get all the rewards, but you take all the risks.”

These successes may be rare, but who can say why, exactly, others don’t do as splendidly? Is it because of the quality of the books, or is it because most authors would rather be writing than promoting and marketing? The authors seeing financial success are active in the *business* of writing books. They also enlist the help of editors, artists

THE INCOME I EARN AS A SELF-PUBLISHED AUTHOR IS VASTLY GREATER THAN WHAT I MADE WITH A BIG FIVE.

—ERIKA KELLY

and cover designers, metadata experts, and even translators. They run ads. In short, to be successful, you need to spend dollars and accept the fact that you’ll need to wear the various hats that are a given when you’re with a traditional publisher. Even then, traditional writers are often disappointed with the publicity efforts promised versus those that are delivered, not to mention the far-off timing of set publication dates, etc.

For Cheryl King, the best thing about self-publishing is that it’s “all mine,” the worst thing is the money. “While anyone can theoretically publish a book on Amazon at no cost,” she says, “if you want a good product, there are costs everywhere. Besides editing and cover design, there’s advertising and marketing, paid editorial reviews and contests, and the small things that add up, like those Adobe and Canva subscriptions. I’m still operating in the red, but I only have two books out.”

“Making a living via words is quite difficult these days,” says Russell Martin, “regardless of the medium or the message.”

How Readers Find You

As authors know, it’s one thing to have written a book. It’s another for readers to find it.

Kelly solves this problem by advertising on Amazon and Facebook. She says Facebook provides the most return. St-Pierre agrees: “I run ads

on Facebook and occasionally on Amazon. I don't have much, if any, social media presence."

Annie Moose says, "My books have benefitted greatly from being in the KDP Select library. That's where I've found the most traction and have made the most money."

Carline is involved in every aspect of the business: "Social media, handselling at festivals, lists like BookBub, Freebooksy, the The Fussy Librarian, etc.," she says. "I teach workshops, speak at conventions."

Felde also does an assortment of things to get her books out there, including talks at libraries and schools, a TEDx talk, interviews on public radio and cable TV, events at bookstores and book festivals, and a dramatic podcast based on her books. The worst part of self-publishing, she says, is "discoverability. You are competing against the big boys who have a staff of hundreds and lots of money to spend on marketing."

The Best Thing About Being Self-Published

Of the writers I chatted with via email, only one said they would never self-publish again. All the others heralded the form, and their enthusiasm is helping change how skeptics and curious traditionally published authors think about self-publishing. Over and over, authors cited creative freedom as one of the very best things, as well as the ability to take ideas that don't fit into typical book categories and try them out to see how they'll do.

"In 2014, I wanted to do a book about personal digital privacy and security for at-risk populations," Violet Blue says, "and not only was there no book like that yet, but publishers also didn't 'get it.' By 2017, my book was being praised by *ELLE* magazine and was picked up by a traditional publisher and given a second life with Penguin Random House. My new self-published memoir about growing up homeless, *A Fish Has No Word for Water*, was in progress when my agent suddenly quit the industry before pitching it. I funneled my setback into a very successful Kickstarter

to self-publish it, and it just recently won the Independent Publisher Book Award and is a finalist in the National Indie Excellence Awards."

"I'm not driven to see my name on a book in a brick-and-mortar bookstore," says St-Pierre. "I ran a small legal consulting business when I began writing. I didn't think I could make more money self-publishing, but in three years, my publishing income eclipsed my consulting income. Everything I made for the first four years I poured back into my self-publishing business. It allowed me to be better and improve the product I sell. . . . Ultimately, if you build relationships, which I do with healthy newsletters, I believe I will be able to continue to stand out because readers want to build relationships, too."

Tips

Self-publishing is a business, and most writers would rather write. Still, the most successful authors treat self-publishing as a business, paying editors, advertising, and spending money to make money.

"You can't just throw a book up on retailer sites and hope they'll promote your book, because they won't," says St-Pierre. "Most of us don't have friends with giant followings on social media who will promote our books." Amazon releases more than 1.4 million self-published books through KDP every year, according to Wordsrated.com. "You've got to create your own reason for people to read your books," says St-Pierre.

Then there's branding, an aspect of marketing that savvy self-published authors consider. Traditional publishers brand authors, so why not, as a self-published author, brand yourself?

"When I first went out on my own," says Kelly, "I didn't understand branding, so I marketed each book separately. This one's a sports romance! This one's a single dad! I got good reviews but unstable sales. When I branded myself as a steamy small-town author, the world changed. Not only did my sales go up, but my ratings did, too. That meant I'd found the correct niche for my stories and voice."

Also, be careful who you hire to help you

market. Begin with recommendations, but vet those referrals to make sure they're a fit for you.

"An entire industry has sprung up to help publicize self-published books," says Kathleen Brady. "We must be very, very careful about who we deal with. The editors I hired were not worth their fees, although they came highly recommended by people I trusted." One way to mitigate this could be by paying an editor to edit a sample of the work and see how it goes before committing to the whole project.

Most of the self-published authors I spoke with emphasized that, whether you're traditionally published or self-published, you're going to be the one doing most of the marketing and promotion.

"I hear a lot of writers say they want to be traditionally published so someone else will take care of the marketing," says Peggy Joque Williams. "That just isn't how the world of publishing works today. I fully expect to put in a lot of effort and likely some money into marketing, whether it be my self-published mystery novels or my traditionally published historical fiction novels."

Besides financial rewards or acclaim, there is the gratification of seeing your book in print and

giving closure to a project that may have been many years in the creation. As Battles says, "It's not an easy path, and you may never make as much as you hoped, but with the right attitude and quality work, it will be gratifying, nonetheless. Imagine all the stories by authors who could never hook an agent or publisher, and whose novels never saw the light of day. In the age we're living in, there's an outlet for them now."

Thanks to these authors' insights and advice, my understanding of self-publishing has deepened and evolved. **AG**

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