
Indie Publishing

A Primer

BY ANGELA BOLE

What is an independent publisher and what makes indie publishing different in ways that writers care about? It's a simple question with a multifaceted answer. My favorite kind.

Let's start at the top. At a high level, an independent publisher is a person or company publishing content free from outside control. It is a privately owned operation, as opposed to a publicly limited company owned by investment shares traded on the stock market. Think of what is being published by the Big Five houses in New York City. Now think of all the other publishing that is going on. Independent publishing is, for the most part, "all the other publishing," or about half of the market share of the entire U.S. book publishing industry. There are myriad independent publishing business models. Here's how the top three—self-publishing, traditional publishing and hybrid publishing—work.

Self-Publishing

Self-publishing is a fast-growing segment of independent publishing. Bowker reports 458,564 self-published titles in 2013, up 17 percent over 2012 and 437 percent over 2008. There are two kinds of self-publishing: assisted self-publishing and DIY self-publishing. Considering the complexities of the publishing business, there are almost no circumstances in which I'd recommend a fully DIY self-publishing approach. No one is an expert at everything. The best self-publishers know this and contract freelance professionals to oversee editing, design, production and distribution. This costs money, of course—generally anywhere from \$5,000 to \$15,000 per book—but it's worth it. Sixty-



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—Angela Bole, CEO and executive director of the Independent Book Publishers Association

Publishing, Morgan James Publishing, No Starch Press and BenBella Books.

five percent of the Independent Book Publishers Association's 3,100 members identify as self-published authors. All of them indicate they use professional services to help bring their books to market.

Traditional Publishing

Although arguably the fastest growing, self-publishing isn't the only segment of independent publishing on the rise. Many independent publishers that employ a traditional business model—where the company contracts the rights to publish an author's work for the duration of an agreed-upon term while the author retains the copyright—are also experiencing growth. According to *Publishers Weekly's* most recent list of fast-growing independent publishers, Verso Books, for example, experienced 31 percent growth in 2014 over 2012. This was attributable, PW said, to the launch of a direct-to-consumer channel in April 2014. This new channel brought in an additional \$840,000 globally in 2014, or 16 percent of the company's total sales. Other fast-growing independent publishers working a traditional publishing model include Fox Chapel

Hybrid Publishing

Hybrid publishing might be the least understood segment of the independent publishing landscape, and the most controversial. It occupies a middle ground between self-publishing and traditional publishing and almost always involves the author paying for some, or all, services. The best hybrids are not vanity presses. On the contrary, reputable hybrid publishers employ professional editors to curate lists through a strict submission process. They also control their own cover designs and editorial processes, making decisions based on what's best for the market rather than simply what the author wants. The benefit to an author



who chooses a hybrid publishing arrangement is that, in exchange for financing some or all of the book's production, she retains all publishing rights and is paid a higher royalty rate on the back end. There are several interesting independents working the hybrid model, including She Writes Press, Inkshares, Booktrope, BQB Publishing and Turning Stone Press.

More Than a Fallback Option

Whether self, traditional or hybrid, independent publishing is more than a fallback option for authors who can't score a deal with one of the Big Five. This is illustrated in the Authors Guild's 2015 member survey, where respondents indicated they are increasingly taking a dual approach to publishing their books. Of the Authors Guild members surveyed, 33 percent said

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they have self-published a book, which suggests that authors are making case-by-case decisions regarding the best publishing model for a particular piece of work.

CJ Lyons, bestselling author of more than twenty novels and a member of the Authors Guild Council, put her finger on it in a Q & A published in the Summer 2014 issue of this bulletin. She said: "But here's the thing no one talks about—and this is what really has publishing scared: the power's not just shifting to the



author, but to the *readers* with the author. My readers can't tell the difference between my indie books and my New York City books."

That bears repeating: CJ Lyons said that her readers can't tell the difference between her indie books and her "New York City books."

And why should they?

Thanks to an abundance of professional editing and design services, along with advances in print-on-demand technology and universal access to online distribution channels, how authors decide to publish their work does not necessarily alter the quality of the finished product or its availability, in print or digital formats.

One additional advantage of going indie is that so many independents are specialists—highly knowledgeable in the particular genre they've dedicated themselves to bringing to market. Whether publishing their own work or the work of others, independent publishers have always been good at finding, and owning, a niche. They know how their genre functions and how to reach devoted readers. What does this mean for authors? Whereas many conglomerate publishers would pass on a book projected to sell less than ten thousand—or even fifteen thousand—copies, an independent publisher with a focus on a particular book's niche might eagerly snatch it up.

Combine everything above with the high degree of care and personal attention most independent publishers are able to provide and you begin to see that authors have a very welcoming scenario to consider among the indie publishing ranks. Diversity is good for publishing. Choices are good for writers and readers. ♦



Angela Bole is CEO and executive director of the Independent Book Publishers Association, based in Manhattan Beach, California. She has a master's in book publishing from New York University, and she served as deputy executive director of the Book Industry Study Group from 2009 to 2013.

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