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Self-published writers, and proud of it

By **Nancy Shohet West** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 09, 2014

Framingham writer and teacher Tilia Klebenov Jacobs refers to the decision to self-publish her first novel as “going rogue.” But in fact, self-publishing is not nearly as “rogue” as it once was.

According to Bowker, the agency that assigns commercial identification numbers to new books in the United States, 2012 saw a 60 percent increase in self-published titles over 2011 and a staggering 422 percent increase since



KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Deborah Plummer Bussey.



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Moderator Natasha Gilmore shares a thought during the Small Press Book Club meeting at Brookline Booksmith

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2007. In 2012, the last year for which official numbers are available, 391,000 hardcover and paperback books were self-published in this country — more than the 301,600 books published by traditional publishers, according to Bowker.

And the number is growing, in large part because print-on-demand websites have made it easy and affordable for anyone who writes a book to see it in published form.

Jacobs, the author of a mystery titled “Wrong Place, Wrong Time,” calls her journey into self-publishing fairly typical. “Most people who go indie have tried to get published the traditional route. I started sending my book out and was getting rejection after rejection,” she said.

Wanted: self-published authors

Globe West is launching monthly profiles of area authors who have self-published a book-length piece of writing within the past year.

“I thought, well, I could do the thing authors have always done and keep trying. It took

J.K. Rowling seven years to find a publisher. It took Madeleine L'Engle 10 years. But with my particular story, if I waited 10 years, it wouldn't make sense anymore.”

One of her main characters is an Iraq war veteran in his early 30s, she said, while others are elderly characters whose back stories took place in postwar Europe. “I thought, what am I waiting for? Other people have had success as writers; why shouldn't I?”

Jacobs, who has also had two pieces published in anthologies with traditional publishers, found her way to a print-on-demand website that charges authors per copy to publish, making it easy for authors to publish as few or as many books as they wish.

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‘Because of the Internet, options are available to writers that didn't exist a few years ago or even a few weeks ago.’

It is a good solution for many writers, said Deborah Plummer Bussey of Westborough, who blogs about self-publishing for Huffington Post and consults on the topic for GrubStreet, a writers' resource center in Boston.

Though in her earlier career as an academic she published scholarly works through traditional publishers, including “Racing Across the Lines,” a book about cross-racial friendships, with Pilgrim Press, she opted for self-publishing when she started writing fiction. Bussey is the author of two books in a series she calls “sister-nun-psycho-social mysteries,” about a former-nun-turned-psychologist who solves mysteries. Bussey was a nun in her early adulthood, and then left the convent to become a psychologist.

Bussey estimates that there are 400,000 self-published titles a year. “The print-on-demand companies are getting better and better,” she said. “If you have money to spend on it, you can publish a book that looks very similar to a traditionally published book.”

Traditional publishers are less enthusiastic about the self-publishing trend. Pamela MacColl, communications director for Boston-based Beacon Press, concedes that while

some authors have found meteoric success with self-publishing, traditional publishing still has many advantages.

“Publishing houses play a role similar to museum curators, selecting from hundreds of thousands of works submitted,” MacColl said. “Books published by reputable houses are taken seriously by both established and new media and are far more likely to get attention. The publisher also has established ties with book-selling channels beyond the self-publishing platform at Amazon, so they reach readers who prefer to shop at a Barnes and Noble or an independent bookstore, or who want to read on their iPad or borrow from a library.”

Most importantly, she said, “publishers help authors shape the final manuscript, line editing, designing the book inside and out, and then offer strong sales and marketing through a range of channels and across social media platforms.”

According to data provided by Bowker, the 301,600 hardcover and paperback titles published by traditional publishers in 2012 represents a 3 percent increase over 2011, but a decrease of about 2 percent from 2010. The number has fluctuated from about 251,000 titles in 2005 to a high of 308,600 in 2010, according to Bowker.

Both Bussey and Jacobs emphasize that although the actual printing process for self-publishers can cost very little through print-on-demand websites, an author who wants to succeed should be prepared to spend extra money for additional services. Jacobs hired an artist to create a beautiful cover for her book, and paid an editor for a thorough review of her manuscript.

“No matter how well you think you know grammar, it takes a professional editor to hone your work and make it really good,” Bussey said. “And that can cost a lot.”

Her other critical recommendation is less costly: a community of peer readers. “Some people think of their works in progress as secret proprietary information and they hold it close to their chest,” she said. “That’s not a good thing. The more eyes you have on your work, the better. You need to connect with other writers, which is where a place like [GrubStreet](#) comes in handy. It’s not enough to have your mom read it and tell you

it's great.”

For Jayne Rowe Jones of Holliston, author of “Retsbol Rises: An Abenaki Lobster Tale,” self-publishing was a more efficient means to an end. She had long thought about putting a fable she invented for her children into print, but felt simply too busy while earning a master's degree to do the necessary legwork of getting an agent.

Instead of taking on the whole task herself, as Jacobs did, Jones found her way to Boston Writers Publishing, a Waltham-based company for self-published authors.

“We're a cooperative,” explained founder Jane Karker, who started her first publishing company in Maine and then extended the model to the Boston area when she received numerous pitches from Boston-based writers.

“Although we look like a traditional publisher, with recognition in Publishers Weekly, we act as a publisher/distributor for self-published authors only. Authors pay us for our services, which include editing, design, printing, and some marketing help, but then they receive one hundred percent of their royalties from sales of the book,” as opposed to the percentage of royalties that traditional publishers pay.

Boston Writers Publishing offers its authors all-day workshops to learn how to publicize and market their books.

It was a highly useful service, according to Jones. “Other places say ‘Sure, we'll publish your book,’ but that's all they offer,” said Jones. “With Boston Writers Publishing, you get the whole package, as far as help with editing, design, and marketing.”

Almost everyone involved in self-publishing seems to agree on the need for relentless promotion and marketing, but done right, it can pay off, said Natasha Gilmore, a buyer at Brookline Booksmith.

“We pride ourselves on being a neighborhood bookstore, and in keeping with that priority, we happily accept books from self-published authors,” Gilmore said.

“Particularly those who are local tend to be quite successful here. In Brookline, there are so many brilliant minds among the population: professors, writers, artists. Lots of

our local authors go the self-publishing route, and we are happy to support those authors. The more they send their own friends in to buy the book, the better it does. Books by local authors and books about local topics tend to do very well here.”

Jacobs acknowledges that self-publishing was once seen as an undesirable alternative for authors who could not find a “real” publisher, but she maintains that the stereotype is fast disappearing.

“Yes, self-publishing used to be viewed as the last refuge of the unpublished writer,” she said. “But that’s changing so fast. The quality of work should speak for itself, rather than the name of the publisher. Think of three great books you read in the past year. You probably remember the author and title, but the publisher? We live in such an interconnected world, and because of the Internet, options are available to writers that didn’t exist a few years ago or even a few weeks ago. In all of human history, there has never been a better time to be an author.”

Nancy Shohet West authored the self-published memoir “The Mother-Son Running Streak Club.” She can be reached at nancyswest@gmail.com.

Correction: *Because of an editing error, a photograph of Deborah Plummer Bussey was misidentified in an earlier version of this article.*

0 COMMENTS

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